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The Multi-Level Meta-Governance of the European Union's Just Green Transitions

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Abstract

In perspective to the European Green Deal (EGD) and contributing to the growing debate on the European Union's (EU) "Green Transition" and "Just Transition," this doctoral research scrutinises the Multi-level Meta-Governance (ML-MG) of the so-called "Just Green Transitions" (JGT); investigating how they are conceptualised and operationalised both at the EU level and that of the Member States of the European Union (MS), putting at the core of the research: how far the JGT are truly just.

This interdisciplinary exploratory research recognises the JGT as politically constructed, institutionally path-dependent, strategically path-contingent, exposed to a prominent level of geopolitical and economic uncertainties, and an issue of the commons. They are subject to a wide range of ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological stands and have a multitude of ideological, philosophic, sociological, political, and environmental perceptions and interpretations, meaning that what could be considered as just is relative and arguable according to different circumstances, geographies, cultures, and institutions.

Based on the exploratory nature of this research and as a result of the uncertainties regarding the various interpretations and perceptions, abductive reasoning has been found suitable for this research. Accordingly, the JGT are viewed from a bounded relativist ontological perspective. The research design strategy pivots on a multimethodology of explorative methods, which are combined accordingly across five research articles. Ten research methods have been applied, including a critical interpretive literature review, social media analysis, discourse and document analysis, case studies, semi-structured interviews, site visits, stakeholder workshops, qualitative comparative analysis, actors' mapping, and policy analysis.

Following the framing chapters (Introduction and Methodological Framework), Article (A) explores the exploration of a conceptual framework informed by social media analysis on JGT, which explores the presence of the term Just Green Transitions in the social media debates, in perspective to the official language and the colloquial ones utilised by a multitude of dominant voices and Twitter users in discussing the transitions. Various interpretations and perceptions were encompassed, and four clusters of the emerging hashtags and related terms were analysed. Following, Article (B) discusses the terminological inexactitudes and the conceptual fragmentations around the JGT through a critical interpretative literature review that encompasses (a)

a conceptual synthesis on the evolution of the EU environmental and climate policies, the history of green transitions since the 1950s and the emergence of the notions of the just transitions since the 1970s up till the introduction of the EGD, and (b) a theoretical synthesis on the evolution of the notions of justice to social justice then to territorial and spatial justice.

Succeeding, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks informed the development of the analytical framework in Article (c), which takes the form of a Twofold Pan-European Analytical Grid (PEAG). Utilising discourse and policy analysis, the PEAG analysed the conceptualisations and operationalisations of JGT in 70 Territorial Just Transition Plans covering 96 regions in the 27 Member States over the 2021-2027 cohesion policy programming period. The analysis covers the JGT governance pathways, objectives, and scales, the degree of involvement of social policy actors in perspective to the power of decision-making. Subsequently, the Analytical framework was applied in Article (D) to explore two contrasting case studies (Sweden and Poland) to deepen the focus of the analysis on the interplay between the territorial governance systems, administrative traditions, industrial legacies, and the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the JGT at the MS level. The outcomes of the four articles have informed the development of Article (E), which discusses the shortcomings of the JTM due to the long-lasting EU governance paradox, juggling the transitions between competitiveness, cohesion, and justness, and highlights the different stands of operationalising the JGT from a multi-level governance, a meta-governance stand, and calling for a multi-level meta-governance alternative steering the governance of the JGT governance in the 27 Member States from a Pan-European meta-governance perspective.

Finally, the research results encompass (a) a conceptual framing including the public debate on social media (Twitter) in the view of the policy discussion of the first twenty months since the introduction of the JTM, (a) a critical interpretative literature review discussing the conceptual, theoretical, and terminological gaps, and framing the JGT as a meta-concept, (b) a Pan-European analytical framework including the conceptualisations and operationalisations of JGT across the 27 Member States over the 2021-2027 programming period included in 70 Territorial Just Transitions Plans, (c) a qualitative comparative case-study on Sweden and Poland, highlighting the transitioning pathways (d) a policy discussion on the lack of a meta-governance framework governing the JGT governance, and presenting possible recommendations to the EU decision and policy-makers to advance the JGT through a multi-level meta-governance (ML-MG) perspective.